

Nothing impracticable required of Christians.

A
S E R M O N
 Preach'd before the
Q U E E N,
 I N T H E
R O Y A L - C H A P E L
 A T
W I N D S O R - C A S T L E,
 October the 18th, 1713.

By *George Stanhope*, D. D. Dean of *Canterbury*,
 and Chaplain in Ordinary to Her Majesty.

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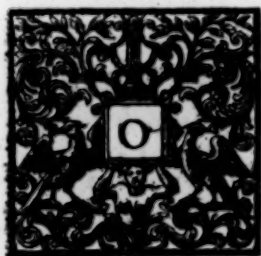
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St. John xv. 5.

*He that abideth in Me, and I in Him,
the same bringeth forth much Fruit.*



OUR Lord is here, under the Figure of a Vine, describing the Union between himself and his Disciples. This he is pleased to express, by their *mutually abiding* in each other. Now They *abide in Him*, by a lively and stedfast Faith; which fastens them into Christ, as Branches to the Root: And He abides in Them, by the Assistances of that Grace; which, like Sap, communicated from the Root to its Branches, enables them to bring forth the Fruit of such Works, as are agreeable to that Faith, and proportionable to those Assistances.

Mean while, in consequence of this Allegory, Fruitfulness is here spoken of, as an Effect,

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No impracticable Conditions

which never fails to follow, upon the Communication of proper Supplies. And thus indeed it happens with the Common Vine. There Nature is uniform; she does her Office, and exerts her Powers, in Productions suitable to them. But, alas! with the Mystical Vine the Case is far otherwise. The Branches here sometimes break themselves off from the Root; frequently obstruct its kindly Influences; nay even labour to justify their own Barrenness, and argue themselves into Rejection and Ruin. That every Branch, how small, how remote soever, should be required, not only to bear, but to *bring forth much Fruit*; is a Condition, seemingly so impracticable, that wicked Men from hence find Excuses, to cover their own Treachery and Sloth. And Many, even of them, who hope to pass for good Men, can very well satisfy themselves, with not corrupting or dishonouring the Tree. Eminence in Piety, and Charity, and every Christian Virtue, they are content (such is their Modesty) to leave to the higher, the larger, and more conspicuous Branches, their Governors, their Clergy, Persons of Post and Distinction, whose Business and Duty indeed it is to excel. But for the Men of the World, in active Stations, and of common Capacity, provided

provided Their Character be not downright scandalous, and their Conversation notoriously evil; the matter is not great, they tell you, whether the good These do, be, either in Kind, or Quantity, distinguishing and valuable.

Such are the real, or the affected Apologies, made use of, to keep in countenance that Negligence, and Coldness, which is so very common, and yet so very unbecoming, so very absurd, in the most important Concern of every Christian. Let me therefore endeavour at present, so far to beat Men out of this Shelter; as to shew, that Religion is neither so indifferent, nor so impracticable a thing, as such Men would represent it: That the Text requires no impossible, and consequently no unreasonable, Manifestation, that we *abide in Christ, and Christ in us*. Or, which comes all to one, that every sincere Christian is capable, not only of bearing some, but even of bringing forth *much* Fruit. And of this I make no doubt to satisfy all those, who will suffer their Attention to go along with me, in the Three Observations that follow.

I. In the *First* Place then, I beg it may be considered, that this matter stands so represented in Scripture, as all along to lay the Blame of Unfruitfulness at every Man's own Door.

Door. The Abilities and Opportunities of doing Good, are entirely in the Disposal of Almighty God. From Him are also those Preventions and Assistances, which incline us to, and succour us in, the doing all that Good, for which we are enabled. But still the last Determination of the Mind, on which the Improvement, or the Abuse, of all those Advantages turns, is left in our Own Hands. And hence it is, that not one single Person stands upon Record in the Book of God, as either punished, or threatned, for any Original Want of Power to act well and wisely: but all have suffered for the Folly and Ingratitude, of neglecting, or misapplying, or, through their own fault, losing, the Advantages, which have been put into their Hands for better Purposes.

Of this (to omit many other Testimonies) the Parables of God's Vineyard in *Isaiah*, and those of the Sower, the wicked Husbandmen, the barren Fig-tree, and the Talents, in the Gospel, are clear and lively Images. The Design, common to them all, is one and the same. Even to instruct us, that, as oft as any Dispensation of the divine Grace proves unsuccessful; This is an Event, by no means to be charged, on the too sparing Distributions of the Giver, but altogether owing to the Degeneracy

required by the Gospel.

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neracy of the Receiver: And, that the Means, afforded for our Salvation, are, in themselves, both proper and sufficient; whatever Failure there may be, in the Use, or the Application of them.

Requiring a full Tale of Bricks, without furnishing proper Materials, is, you know, mentioned, as one Instance of the most rigorous Bondage, that ever was imposed. And, shall we dare to imagine, that God, who is all Equity and Goodness; That God, who made so terrible an Example of that Tyrant, can himself be capable of the like Cruelty and Oppression? 'Tis true, We once find him stiled an Austere and an hard Master, One, that expects *to reap where he had not sown, and to gather where he had not strowed*: But far be Matth. xxv. 24. it from us to suppose, that this was meant for a true State of the Case. No. It is the impudent Allegation of a slothful and wicked Servant; who, to palliate his own Negligence, complains of arbitrary Demands, and invincible Difficulties in his Duty. 'Tis the very Picture of all those disingenuous Wretches, who presume to place their Unprofitableness to God's Account, rather than take to themselves the Shame and Condemnation of it. For, that Both these are due to every slothful Servant,
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is plain, from the Success of the Rest, in that Parable. They improved their Talents, to their Lord's Satisfaction, and their own mighty Advantage. Now All of them laboured under equal Difficulties; and, had the Diligence and Management been equal, the Commendation and Reward of All, had, no doubt, been equal also.

Thus, again, it is in the Figure now before us. The Spiritual, as well as the Natural Vine, imparts prolifick Moisture, to every one of its Branches. Without those necessary Communications from the Root, Fruit is not expected in either Case. But if every Believer have Christ abiding in Him, by the genial Influences of his Holy Spirit; it is but fit, that Every one, thus quickned, should manifest his mutual abiding in Christ, by Actions suitable to his Principles, and his Advantages.

But be it so (you will say) that all are bound to bring forth Fruit, because all have received that vital Principle, which enables them so to do; Yet, whether all can be bound to bring forth *much* Fruit, may still appear no unreasonable Doubt. And therefore, to justify the Character of my Text, and make good the Possibility of answering its Demand, I desire you to take notice in the

II. *Second Place*, That, by *much* Fruit here, is not, cannot be, meant any determinate Quantity of Goodness, which should serve as a fixed and common Standard, for all Persons whatsoever to come up with; but much Fruit is *much* in Proportion, and with due Regard to the Capacity and Circumstances of that Person, from whom it is required. God, who made all Men, remembers whereof they are made. He kindly considers, not only with what an Alloy of Passions and Infirmities human Nature in general is debased; but he sees exactly, how large a Mixture of these goes into the Composition of each particular Man. The Shortness of the Understanding, the Bent of the Temper, Complexion, and Constitution, the Difference of Education, the Power of Prejudices, not wilfully taken up or indulged: These, and many other incidental Differences, will, unquestionably, be allowed for in Account; and visibly separate between them, who fall through Frailty; and those, who presumptuously rush upon Sin and Death. The Servant, who transgress'd his *Master's Will*, *because he knew it* Luke xii. 47, 48. *not*, our Lord hath told us, shall be gently dealt with, and receive but *few* Stripes; Whereas *He*, who *knew his Lord's Will*, and *prepared not himself*; that is, would not conform to

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it, but acted against the Light and the Reproaches of his own Mind; This Man shall find no Mercy, but *be beaten with many Stripes*.

Now, if these be the Measures of inflicting Punishments; is not the reason of the Rule the same, in the Distribution of Rewards also? Shall not that Judge, who knows what is in Man; He, who searches, and so often calls for, the Heart; regard the Sincerity of our Intentions, the Zeal of our good Desires, the Assiduity of our Endeavours; and interpret, and graciously accept, what we wished and laboured honestly to do, as if it had been actually done? Surely, we are justified abundantly in arguing thus, from those very Passages, out of the New Testament, referr'd to under my former Particular. As for the purpose,

Matth.
XXV. 14.
to 31.

Of the Servants in the Parable, it is first observed, that they had Talents distributed among them, *to every Man according to his several Ability*; and then, that they were commended and preferred, for Improvements, answerable to their respective Receipts. He, who was credited with *Two* Talents only, had not an Increase of *Five* demanded from him; but obtained the same Character of Fidelity, for doubling those *Two*; with Him, who, having *Five* to traffick with, brought in to his
Lord

Lord a Return of *Ten*. And reason good. For Faithfulness and Diligence are still the same, be the Sum, they are employed about, little or much. The only thing these spiritual Traders stand concerned for, is, to see, that the Treasure, charged to their Account, be not mispent, or suffered to lye dead upon their Hands; but always so managed, that the Produce may keep Proportion with the prime Stock.

Thus again, in that other Parable of the Sower, the Crop, even upon the good Ground, was very unequal. Some came up to an *hundred*, Marsh. xiii. 8, 23. and Some bore *sixty* fold: yet that, which brought but *thirty*, is allowed to be good Ground. Now, when there was so great a Disparity in the Product, how comes the Character of the Soil to continue the same? No doubt, from hence. That, although the Seed was alike in all; yet this divine Sower, like every common Husbandman, does neither scatter all over the Field, with a perfectly even Hand; nor does he find every Furrow there, equally rich, and fat, and qualified for a like plentiful Increase. And yet there may be That, in every part, which shall denominate the Whole good Ground; though neither the Degrees, nor the Effects, of that Goodness be throughout the same.

And yet, how surprisingly Great even These may be, with due Management and Care, is hardly to be conceived. For the spiritual Soil hath this very observable, and indeed peculiar, Advantage, that Bearing never puts it out of heart; but, quite contrary, strengthens and enriches it. One holy Desire naturally kindles more, and each Endeavour invigorates another. These ripen into Acts, Acts into Habits; then Ease and Pleasure grow upon our Practice, inspire a noble Emulation of equalling Others, and make us ashamed, not to be every Day excelling our Selves. Thus every Harvest of good Works is the Seedtime of a Crop, disposed to multiply so exceedingly, That they, who began with *Thirty*, will, in Process of Time, put fair for *Sixty*, and may, perhaps, at last, come up to an *Hundred* fold.

The true Intent of which Allegories is, *that an honest and good Mind is all in all*. Integrity, and Diligence in our Duty, justify this Resemblance: Because These are the proper Proofs of our Virtue, and make up that Disposition, which we are strictly answerable for. When this main Point is secured; the particular Instances, and Proportions of our Fruitfulness, shall not be so nicely insisted upon; as, from Persons acting in a higher and
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more spacious, to draw invidious Comparisons, to the Prejudice of them, who are confined to a narrower and lower, Sphere. In this unalterable Equity, that Rule of our Lord is founded, *Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required*, but where Men sow sparingly, they can expect to reap but sparingly.

So again, the *poor Widow* was, for her *two Mites*, pronounced a more bountiful Contributor to the Treasury, than *all those, who were rich, and cast in much*. Mark xii. 41—44. Because they spared those larger Sums out of their Abundance; but *she, of her Want, parted with all she had*. The Parity of Reason is the same, with regard to good Works in Any kind whatsoever. For what St. Paul says of Alms, hath equal force, for every sort of these: That, *If there be first a willing Mind; it is accepted, according to that a Man hath, and not according to that he hath not*. 2 Cor. viii. 12.

III. My *Third* Consideration, for supporting the Possibility of *bringing forth much Fruit*, is, that, not only the Quantity, but also the Quality, of our Fruit, is not expected to be in every one the same. The Analogy of the Vine holds indeed so far, that all its Grapes are generous and good. But it is not with the mystical Tree, as with the Natural; all whose Branches bear
Grapes,

Grapes, exactly of one sort and taste. Plainly, and without a Metaphor, thus. The Will of God, in his Providence, explains, and applies, the Will, written in his Word. The Laws left in Scripture are general, and provide for all Orders and Conditions of Men. But the different Relations, and Capacities, wherein each Person stands, bring those general Rules home; and direct such a Choice and Practice, as is seasonable and necessary for that Man's private Circumstances. This is the Purport of *St. Paul's* elegant Similitude, drawn from the human Body; Whose Members become both useful and beautiful, by keeping close to their peculiar Functions: This is what our excellent Catechism expresses, by *doing our Duty, in that State of Life, unto which it shall please God to call us*. And this I take it, is what the Heathen Philosophers heretofore intended, by advising us to *follow Fate, whither soever it shall lead us*. The carving out of our respective Fortunes is reserved to a Wiser and better Hand; it is our Business, and will be our Praise, contentedly to take the Part set for us; well to consider our peculiar Engagements, and so to fill and adorn the Character, we are appointed to sustain.

1 Cor. xii.

Now this, you must needs allow me, is no more

more, than every Man may do. It is not, nor were it fit it should be, in our Power, to determine, whether our Station should be high or low. But, supposing us to be placed in an inferior Degree; it manifestly falls within our own Determination, whether we will behave our selves with Meekness, and Modesty, and Respect; Or whether we will shew our selves assuming and busy, factious and turbulent, malepert and provoking: Whether Poverty shall carry us to Dishonesty and Discontent; Or whether we will want, without murmuring at God, and thankfully subsist on the Liberality of our Benefactors.

So on the other hand; If Wealth and Honour be our Portion; 'tis certainly in our own Power, whether we will treat those below us with Cruelty and Disdain; Or whether we will look down upon their Weaknesses and their Wants, with the compassionate Tenderness of a Good, and the engaging Condescensions of a truly Great, Mind: Whether Luxury, and Wickedness, and Irreligion, shall be countenanced and cherished by our Abuse of Riches; Or whether Piety and Virtue shall be vigorously enforced by our Authority, cheerfully supported by our Bounty, and effectually recommended by our Example.

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So just, upon the whole Matter, is Almighty God, in requiring such Fruit only, as himself enables Men to bear. So full of Encouragement that Obedience, which is estimated by Abilities; and, by a kind Construction, reckoned to do All, when it hath done its Best. So inexcusable, Lastly, is Every one, who suffers himself to continue destitute of that Spiritual Union with his Saviour; the Marks and Conditions whereof are so ready at hand, that no possible Circumstance of human Life can incapacitate him for, or ever deprive him of, them.

And now, after having proved the Possibility of doing so much as is required; shall I need to insist upon the Necessity of doing as much as we can? Surely the Obligations of Duty and of Gratitude, the Authority and the Goodness of our Master, the Evidence we ought to make of our Sincerity, the Rewards of our Service, and the dismal Consequences of Unfaithfulness and Neglect, are Considerations too important, and such, as, one would hope, are, here at least, too well understood, to fail of engaging our very utmost Endeavours. What I have been delivering upon this Occasion, may indeed suffice, to render us contented with any, the meanest, the most
afflicted

afflicted, Condition of Life : Because a Christian's End and Aim are future ; and even the deepest and most rugged Roads are capable of leading us, as safely, as directly, to that blissful Place , where every good Man hopes at last to arrive. But, if a more indulgent Providence appoint us smooth and pleasant Paths to travail in, are we not still More bound to make the best of our Journey? And, shall the very Goodness of the Way be turn'd to an Occasion, of either wandering out of it, or loitering in it? The Ground, which brought forth *thirty* Fold, I said indeed, was allowed to be good. But, if that, which brought *thirty* only, were qualified to have brought *sixty*, or an *hundred* Fold, can any Man of common Sense imagine, that the same favourable Character would, upon these Terms, have been given of it? Assuredly, the same Equity, which accepts, and places to our Account of Profit, the Good we wish to do, but could not; will move our Righteous Judge, strictly to reckon with us, and to charge under the Article of Loss, all the Good we might have done, but did not. It is therefore the Part of Every one, who desires to make up this Account with Comfort, to enter upon a nice Computation of his several Advantages ; and to manage each of

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these, so industriously and conscientiously, that the Balance may stand right, between his Powers and his Performances.

Suffer me to conclude my present Discourse, by briefly, but most earnestly, urging this Consideration, upon all my Hearers, whom God hath distinguished from their Brethren, by a Station more elevated than the rest. In vain alas! nay to your mighty Detriment, is this Distinction made by Providence; except it be your Care, as eminently to distinguish yourselves. Your Riches, your Honours, your Power, your Knowledge, your Leisure, your every Preeminence, are so many Abilities of bringing in a larger Increase. An Increase of Reward to yourselves, and of Glory to Him, who distributes to every Man, in measure, severally as he will; but who gives to all Men, with the same View, and universal Obligation, of profiting, according to the Gifts thus dealt among them. Thus what, in meaner People, would not only be excused, but might even be commended; for you to content yourselves with, would involve You in Guilt and Reproach. If They attain to a personal and solitary Virtue, 'tis well. But it is expected, that You should not only exercise, but excel in, Virtue; that You should shine as Lights to all beneath;
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lead others into it, and make them in love with it. You have the Privilege, of displaying the Charms of Godliness in the very best Light; of rendring them more attractive, by becoming so many living Instances of its Excellence and Beauty; of adding Weight to every good Persuasion from the Pulpit; and, most of any, under God, of crowning all our holy Labours with Efficacy and Success. Much of this may be done by your Authority; much more, when Authority shall be seconded by Example. Much indeed will, of Necessity, be done by you; either to the Glory of God, and the Advancement of his Religion, or to the Dishonour of the One, and unspeakable Prejudice of the Other. In short, Extent of Influence will evermore hold proportion, with the height of the Position. Your Piety, your Charity, your Devotion, your every Christian Grace, will shed their Beams around, cherish the Seeds of Goodness where they fall, and warm the Hearts of the Many, who follow, and are proud to imitate you. But then, as the Profit of your Good cannot, so neither can the Mischief of your Evil, be confined to your Selves alone. The Vices of great Persons are like baleful Exhalations, which taint all the neighbouring Air. They scatter
their

their Venom far and wide; give great Boldness, and even Credit, to Wickedness; debauch the Principles of private People, and always portend Calamities to the Publick.

To sum up all I have been pressing in one Word; Let it, I beseech you, never be forgotten, that no Man can escape eternal Misery and Destruction, who does not *abide* in Christ: That no Man does abide in Him, who *brings not forth much Fruit*: That the Fruit of every one is required to abound, in correspondence to his Ability of bringing forth: And Lastly, That as now there are Differences of Degrees and Capacities among Men, so shall it be hereafter. *One Star* shall then *exceed another Star in Glory*; and the mightier Sinners shall be more mightily tormented.

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